

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

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MIKE NEELAND wouldn't pay the two hundred thousand dollars, so he was getting Sam Gordon back—piece by piece.

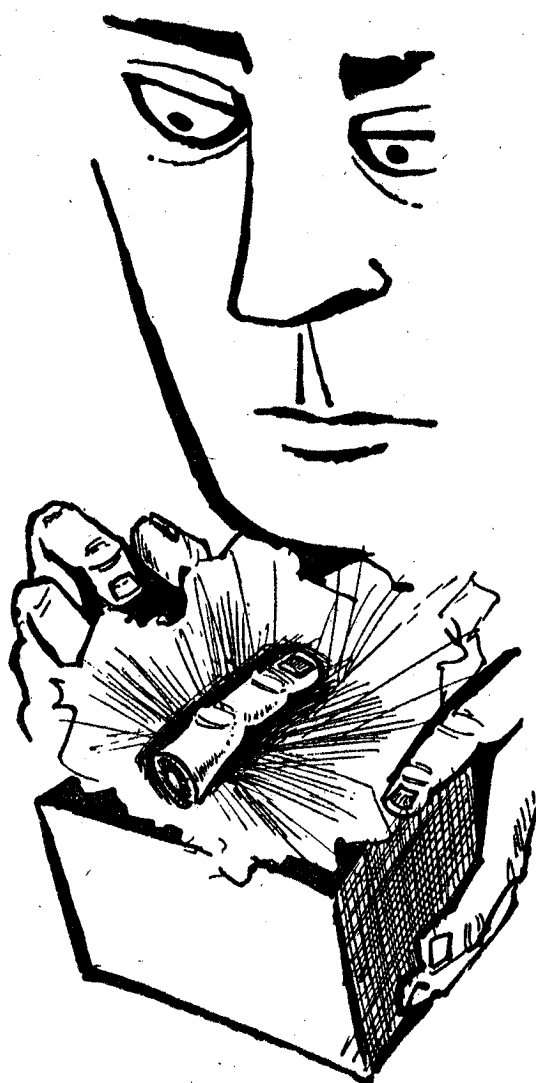
The little finger lay on cotton in a small cardboard box open on the desk. "That came yesterday," Neeland said. "I can expect a little more in today's mail." He glanced at his watch. "And that would be at one-thirty."

I studied the finger for a few seconds and then sat down. It was something new for me to act like a detective—about as different as you could get. I usually put people away for Neeland, not find them. "Why don't you pay?" I asked.

Mike puffed his panetella. "What's Gordon to me anyway? Just a bum in a tuxedo. I pay him one-fifty a week to help keep things under control at the Blue Moraine. I don't even remember the color of his eyes."

"Brown," his wife Eve Neeland said. She smiled faintly and lazily. "I notice everybody's eyes."

The wrapping the box had come in told me that it had been mailed



Criminals do have their problems. There's the help situation, for one thing. Haven't you found it hard to get a competent professional crook these days who will put in an honest day's work for you?



YOU CAN TRUST *me*

A NOVELETTE
by Jack Ritchie

in North Lancaster, just across the state line, at ten-thirty the night before. "Why should anybody figure that you'd part with two hundred thousand to get Gordon back?"

Neeland shrugged. "Maybe Gordon talked bigger than he was and

somebody believed he was like a brother to me, or my right arm."

I read the block-penciled note. WE'VE GOT MORE OF GORDON AND PROMISE REGULAR DELIVERY. WHEN YOU'RE READY TO PART WITH THE TWO HUNDRED THOUSAND, PUT AN AD IN THE LOST AND FOUND COLUMN OF THE JOURNAL. LOST. BLACK AND WHITE TERRIER. ANSWERS TO NAME OF WILLI. WE'LL GET IN TOUCH WITH YOU.

I wasn't serious when I asked the next question. "Why not go to the police?"

Neeland laughed. "Danny, if this was something simple, like just murder, I might for kicks let the cops here handle it. I pay some taxes like anybody else and besides a few of the precinct captains earn more from me than from the city. But kidnaping is federal stuff. I couldn't keep the work local. And once the federal boys get one foot inside anybody's door, they got the habit of looking in four directions. I spent twenty years building this organization and I'm not going to have it fall on my ears because of a punk like Gordon. I'm not anxious to have the F.B.I. signing me up for a TV quiz before Congress."

And that was the answer, of course. That's why some people

expected Neeland to part with the money. To keep the troubles in the family.

Eve caressed a wave of honey hair back into place. "In that case why not pay what they want? I don't think two hundred thousand is going to break you, or even make a little bend."

"It's still a lot of money and I don't want to start a habit. Other ambitious people might get the idea that it's a new indoor sport to get money out of me if I let this thing pass." Neeland scowled. "I just want to know one way or the other who's got the crazy nerve to try to pull something like this on me. And when you find that out, Danny, you can get rid of them any way you like. Any way at all."

Eve tamped a cigarette on the shiny desk. "Why not bail Gordon out first and then go out after whoever has him?"

I smiled. "Gordon's still got nine fingers and ten toes. And there's still more than those digits to work on. So we've got time. If Mike pays now, the people who have Gordon will find the whole world to hide in. But if he keep things the way they are, they've got to stick around this part of the country."

Eve's gray eyes turned to me. "You're sure cold-blooded," she said. But it sounded like a compliment.

Neeland laughed. "Danny never loses sleep after any job I give him."

"You got an organization right here," I said. "When you're not using me, I suppose you put some of your help to work?"

"Sure. But they're punks. All of them. And that's my fault because that's the way I pick them. I don't like anybody too smart in the organization." He studied me. "I import you in, Danny, for the more delicate jobs because you got the brains not to make mistakes and embarrass me. But I wouldn't want you around all the time. I'd get nervous about it."

"How long has Gordon been gone?"

"A week. I was supposed to put the two hundred thousand in a briefcase and see that it was dropped at the intersection of J and 41 ten miles out of town at eleven last Tuesday night. I tried being cute. Left a dummy package full of newspaper strips instead and had three of my boys staked out near the place. They picked up a weasel character when he stopped his beat-up car and reached for the package. We took him to a place where nobody can hear screams and asked him questions. His name was Baini, but he was a nothing. He never heard of Gordon. That I'll swear to, be-

cause he was willing to tell us anything—his grandmother's maiden name if we were interested. All he knew was that he got a phone call and a promise of fifty bucks if he performed the errand. He was supposed to take the briefcase back to his room and wait until somebody called for it. He couldn't even give a description of whom to expect."

"I suppose you sent somebody to Baini's room to wait?"

Neeland nodded. "But nothing doing. There are a couple of hills at J and 41 and the moon was bright. They must have been watching and seen us pick up Baini. I got a note the next day. They said that if I tried anything like that again, they'd cut Gordon's throat."

"And so?"

Neeland grinned. "And so I let it ride. I was hoping they'd do that little thing and get the hell out of the country. But now I see they're still in business."

"Who knows Gordon is gone?"

"Just the three of us in this room and the three boys who picked up Baini. They're not too bright, but they know how to keep their mouths shut. I don't like to have the news spread around."

"Do they know that you're now getting part of Gordon?"

"No. Not that. They might get

restless and think I'm not a good type boss to work for if I let that happen to one of my help." Neeland lit a fresh cigar. "Gordon worked at the Blue Moraine. That's one of my places at the county line. He's got a wife. Dorothy. But she doesn't know that anything's happened. Whoever's got Gordon didn't bother to let her know about it—figuring she doesn't have the two hundred grand, I suppose. I told her that I sent Gordon off to San Francisco on a little errand. He'd be gone awhile."

"She believed that? He left without packing or saying good-bye?"

"I told her Gordon didn't have the time. It was a hurry-up job for me."

"What did Gordon look like?"

"Around six feet. Lot of white teeth. That's about it. Like I said, he was practically a stranger."

There was a knock at the door and an elderly shirt-sleeved porter came in. "Your mail, Mr. Neeland."

Neeland took the letters and the small package and nodded the porter out of the room.

Eve Neeland rose. "I've seen fingers before." She picked up her coat and left the room.

Neeland used a pen knife to cut away the string from the package. He unwrapped it and lifted the cover. "It's what I expected."

From the curve of the finger, I guessed that it had come from the right hand. The post mark on the wrapping indicated that it had been mailed the night before in Griffin, a river town twenty-five miles west. This time there was no note. They figured Neeland already had the message.

I put on my hat. "I might as well drive over to the Blue Moraine. It's as good a place as any to start."

Neeland nodded. "I'll phone ahead to see that you get cooperation."

I left him and went through the big room of the Parakeet. This was the club Neeland called his headquarters, but he had at least a half a dozen others in this county alone. The place was cleaned up for tonight's business, except for a technician who had one of the roulette wheels apart and was checking for dips.

The Blue Moraine was located in the rolling hills twenty miles outside of town. It had been built to look like a highway restaurant, but that fooled nobody—if anybody needed fooling.

The bar was big and cool and except for the single bartender and a thin fair man on a stool, it was deserted.

The thin man spoke. "Regan?"

I nodded.

"Neeland phoned and told me to expect you. I'm Van Camp. I manage the place for Mike."

He ordered two bourbons. "What can I do for you?"

"I'd like to know about Sam Gordon. Whatever you can tell me."

He raised an eyebrow. "He's in trouble?"

"Maybe."

When I said nothing more, he shrugged. "Nothing much to tell. He hasn't been in here for a week. He's just another boy here. Looks good in a tuxedo. Just like one of the customers. Pretty big. Your size. A non-drinker. Never saw much of him outside of working hours. That's about all I know. I don't associate with the help."

The bartender brought the drinks and moved away.

"What's this all about?" Van Camp asked.

"Neeland didn't tell you?"

"No."

I sipped my drink. "Then you wouldn't want to know."

He shrugged again. "All right. I wouldn't want to know."

"When was the last time you saw Gordon?"

"A week ago."

"Where do you think Gordon is?"

"I wouldn't know. Maybe he's on a drunk."

"You said he didn't drink."

He was faintly irritated. "Not during working hours, he didn't. What he did away from the place I wouldn't have any idea."

"Who does?"

"I suppose his wife would know. Why don't you ask Dorothy?"

"How many other people do you have here? With jobs like Gordon's, I mean."

"Three. Joe, Fred, and Pete."

"What's the name of Joe's wife?"

"How would I know?"

"And Pete's wife?"

He saw what I was getting at. "Gordon brought Dorothy in one evening and introduced me."

"You've got a fine memory. Or was she that impressive?"

He glared at me. "Ask me about Gordon. Why don't you just stick to him?"

I glanced around the big bar room. "You do your real business upstairs? That's where the tables are?"

He nodded.

"Nice place."

His mouth got tight. "It should be. It's built the way I paid for it."

I smiled. "But now you just manage it? Neeland bought in?"

He picked up his drink. "You might say that."

"Does it leave a bitter taste?"

The bartender came over to me. "Mr. Neeland's on the line. He

wants to talk to you, Mr. Regan."

I went to the wall phone behind one end of the bar and picked up the dangling receiver. "Regan."

Neeland was worried. "They sent a note to Gordon's wife."

"She called you?"

"That's right. She says she's going to the police if I don't get Gordon back right away."

"Can't you stall her a couple of days more?"

"A few hours was all I could manage. She knows that Gordon's coming back piece by piece now and she doesn't like the idea at all."

"You want me to talk to her now?"

"I guess so. I can't think of anything else. I told her you'd be over."

I tapped a cigarette out of my pack with one hand. "Suppose I can't do anything?"

He hesitated. "Then I guess I'll have to pay the two hundred thousand. I haven't got any choice." He gave me Dorothy Gordon's address and hung up.

She lived in one of the old, red-brick apartment buildings on the east side. When she opened her door I saw that she had big dark eyes, a small face, and was on the edge of being pretty.

Apparently she was one of those

women who believe in tugging at a handkerchief in moments of stress. "Mr. Regan?"

"Yes. I've come to help you."

She shook her head. "Nobody can help me except Mr. Neeland. He's simply got to pay the money they want."

"Why?"

Her eyes widened. "Why? Because—because they're cutting—"

"I mean, why should Neeland be the one to pay?"

"But he has the money, doesn't he?"

"That's what somebody figures. But why should Gordon be worth two hundred grand to him?"

She seemed horrified that I could think a thing like that. "Sam worked for him."

"They probably exchanged less than fifty words a year."

"But—but I'd pay the money, if I had it."

"He's your husband, but he's nobody to Neeland." There was a colored framed photograph on one of the side tables. Sam Gordon had wavy hair and a half-smile that was meant to be devastating. He was the type they cast as chariot riders in Cinemascope. You just knew he had pretty muscles.

Dorothy Gordon gave the handkerchief another tug. "If Mr. Neeland doesn't pay, I'm going right to the police."

"If the kidnapers find that out, they'll undoubtedly kill your husband."

Her hands moved helplessly. "But there's nothing else I can do. I can't let them—do what they're doing to Sam."

"How long you been married?"

She dabbed at her eyes. "Three years."

"And how long has he been working?"

"Just this last year. Ever since—"

She stopped. "I finished for her. 'Ever since your money was gone?'"

She flushed. "That's none of your business."

I wondered how much money she had brought into the marriage. A man who knows himself to be as darling as Gordon's smirk showed usually doesn't marry for nothing.

"I'm going to call the police," she said with final determination.

"Give me a couple of hours."

"Why? You won't be able to get my husband back."

"I can try. Just a couple of hours. Until five."

She seemed undecided, as though she were looking for someone to make the decision for her.

"Look," I said. "If I don't come up with anything by five, you can call the police. Now let's see the note they sent you."

She went to a French desk against the wall and brought back the piece of paper.

The words were again in block printing. MRS. GORDON. WE HAVE YOUR HUSBAND AND WE WANT TWO HUNDRED THOUSAND DOLLARS FOR HIM. THE MAN WHO CAN GIVE THAT IS MIKE NEELAND, BUT HE'S BEING STUBBORN. YOUR HUSBAND HAS LOST TWO FINGERS ALREADY AND CAN LOSE MORE. ASK NEELAND FOR THE DETAILS.

I handed the note back. "Tell me about your husband. How does he spend the day?"

"Well, he usually works at the Blue Moraine from nine at night until four or five in the morning, depending on how much the play at the tables has thinned out."

"And then?"

"He usually comes back home and sleeps until noon."

"Usually?"

"Always. Then he eats breakfast. And then . . ." She thought it over. "Then he'd go to a movie or the beach."

"Alone?"

"With me."

"And then?"

"We'd come home and—read until it was time for him to go to work."

YOU CAN TRUST ME

"I'd like to have a snapshot of your husband."

She went back to the desk and came back with a black and white photograph. "But remember," she cautioned. "If I don't hear from you by five o'clock, I'm going to phone the police."

I drove back to the Parakeet.

Eve Neeland was in one of the booths in the barroom. "Ah," she said, "the man who walks like a detective."

I got a drink and brought it to her booth.

She looked over the rim of her glass. "How are you doing?"

"I'm moving. That's about all." I took out the snap of Gordon.

She glanced at it. "He likes himself, doesn't he?" She met my eyes and smiled slightly. "You're not pretty. I guess you're glad to hear that. I've been watching you."

"Don't you watch them all?"

"You mean did I watch Gordon?"

"You're the one who said it."

"Well, he never made it, Danny boy. He was a peasant with ideas. About me and more. But I don't get used as a stepladder."

"Of course Mike doesn't know a thing about it?"

"Now that was a silly question."

"You get bored pretty easy, don't you?"

"With some people. Now you

might be something different."

"Does Mike interest you?"

"Almost. But the days are long." The gray eyes were speculative. "Mike is a worker. He gets there by making everything a steady job. It took him twenty years to build what he has. How long would it take you?"

"It's not my line of work."

She smiled. "Has any woman ever held on to you for long?"

"Where's Mike?"

"In his office."

I finished my drink and got up.

She watched me. "You'll be back. Some time."

Mike Neeland was going over the books with one of his accountants. He shooed the man out of the office. "How's it going?"

"I may be on to something. Dorothy Gordon's giving me until five to do something spectacular. Do you know where this Baine lives?"

"Sure, but I think you're heading into a dead end. He doesn't know a thing." Neeland searched his memory. "He's got a room on the east side on Jackson. A run-down hotel called the Sterling."

At the Sterling, the desk clerk knew the answer without having to look it up. "Baine's in 407."

"Is he in?"

"More than likely. He can't get

around too much right now." The clerk looked me over. "Accident, I guess. I'm not nosey. I told him to go to the hospital, but he won't."

The musty self-service elevator took me to the fourth floor. I softly tried the doorknob of 407, but the door was locked. I knocked.

The voice was muffled. "That you, Al?"

If that was the key to get in, I'd use it. "Yeah."

I waited half a minute before I heard the key turn.

Baine's eyes widened when he saw I wasn't Al and he tried to close the door again.

I pushed my way in, using a hand on his chest. The shove wasn't hard, but he cried out and toppled over. I saw why when I closed the door. Both his feet were bound with bandages, strictly a do-it-yourself job. He lay on the floor moaning until he finally decided to crawl to the brass-frame bed. He sank down on the edge of it, his mind still on the pain.

Baine was a small man in his twenties with black darting eyes that saw a lot but never learned anything. His face was swollen and the color varied from putty to purple. Mike's boys must have started there before they tried being more subtle.

When he managed to look at me, I said, "Who's Al?"

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He licked his lips. "A porter here. He brings me my meals."

"Did you tell him all about your little accident?"

He must have thought I was another one of Mike Neeland's boys. He shook his head quickly. "No, sir. Not a word to anybody. Nobody at all. I swear it."

"And you don't know anything about Sam Gordon?"

The name set him off like one of Pavlov's conditioned dogs. Whenever it still could, color drained from his face and his voice trembled up the scale. "I never heard of him, mister. Honest. I swear on the Bible."

I doubted if he'd seen a Bible in ten years, but he wasn't the type who will work at keeping a secret if things get uncomfortable.

I took Gordon's photograph out of my pocket. "Do you know him?"

He nodded eagerly. "Sure. That's Ernie."

"Ernie what?"

"Ernie Wallace." Bains's eyes flickered with a sudden fox-like intelligence. "Do other people know him as Sam Gordon?"

I took the snap away from him. "Just tell me what you know about Ernie. Don't keep anything to yourself. You may have had a rough time, but things could get worse. I have a lot more imagina-

tion than the people you met last week."

He spoke fast to keep me from being tempted. "I don't know practically nothing about Ernie. We just played pool at Swenson's. Me and Ben and Fitz. We only knew Ernie for a couple of weeks. He never even told us where he lived."

"Did he ever mention what he did for a living?"

"No. I didn't ask. You don't ask questions like that around here."

"And what do you and Ben and Fitz do for a living?"

He stirred uneasily. "Just anything that comes along. Twenty bucks here, thirty there."

"Anything that doesn't take work?"

He nodded.

"When you picked up that package, the one that made you so much unhappiness last week, what did you think was in it?"

"I don't know," he said hastily. "I don't think about things like that. I just follow orders."

"You weren't even tempted to peek?"

"No, sir. You don't do anything like that. You don't cross the big boys." He wiped some of the sweat from his face. "We just run errands like. Me and Ben and Fitz. Or maybe we use muscle on somebody. We get a phone call telling us to do something and we don't

ask questions. And in the next day's mail we get twenty, thirty bucks. Sometimes fifty."

"Did Ernie know about how you three picked up your spending money?"

Baini shrugged. "I suppose he could pick up the information somehow. Maybe we let a word go here and there."

"Where can I find Fitz and Ben? And what about their last names?"

"They hang around Swenson's most of the day. That's a bar up the street. Ben Grady and Fitz—Fitz that's Fitz's last name. They got rooms somewhere in the neighborhood, but I don't know exactly where."

Baini flinched as I lit a cigarette, obviously thinking of it as an instrument of torture.

I smiled. "You won't tell anybody I was here?"

"No, mister. Nobody at all." He shook his head almost sorrowfully. "I don't know nothing about anything."

I took my car a block and a half down the street. Swenson's was a tired old-fashioned saloon with bad lighting and a lazy clean-up man. Last night's cigarette butts were still stamped flat on the floor. It was the kind of a place that used to have sawdust on the floor and

a family entrance. But that was twenty years ago and times and neighborhoods change.

I ordered a shot and a beer chaser.

Two beat-up tables and some chairs were along one wall. The pool table was busy in a four way game of eight ball.

The bar mirror let me know that I was being sized up. My suit told the cue boys that I was either a tourist who happened to get lost in this part of town or maybe I was somebody with business for one of them.

I changed my mind about asking questions and names here. They would make my face remembered and I didn't go for that.

I killed the shot and left.

Across the street I moved into a cafe. The counterman took the toothpick out of his mouth—so he could listen better, I suppose.

"Coffee," I said and walked by him to the telephone booth. I dialed Swenson's Bar.

There was a click as somebody picked up the receiver. "Swenson."

"I'd like to talk to Ben Grady."

"He's not here. Haven't seen him in three, four days."

"Send Fitz to the phone."

There was thirty seconds of silence and then a younger voice took it up. "Fitz talking."

"I got a little work for you."

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"Who is this? Tony?"

"No. But I'm talking for him. It's worth thirty bucks. No sweat."

He hesitated. "How's Tony's—ah—stiff arm? Bothering him a lot, I mean?"

The man was exercising his little brain. A hundred to one Tony had oil in all his hinges. "Cut that," I snapped. "We both know that Tony's as limber as they come."

Fitz was apologetic. "Just checking. What do you want me to do?"

"Go to your place and wait one hour. Somebody may or may not bring you a package. He'll tell you what to do with it."

"May or may not?"

"That's right. It all depends on how things work on this end. But don't worry your head about it. You'll find the thirty in your mail tomorrow."

He might have wanted to ask more questions, but he didn't try. I was one of the big boys to him and you did just as you were told.

I went back to my coffee and watched Swenson's until a square-faced, light-complexioned kid left the place. He was not much over twenty-one. He adjusted his snap brim and began walking west.

I tossed a dime on the counter and left. I gave Fitz a block and a half and followed on the other side of the street.

After four blocks he turned into a grimy three story apartment building. When I got there I stepped inside and checked the mail slots. Fitz's apartment was number 31.

I went on to a drugstore and bought an envelope and a stamp. I slipped thirty dollars into the envelope and addressed it to Fitz. I didn't want him to lose faith in telephone calls. I thought he might be getting another one soon.

In the phone booth at one end of the store I dialed the Parakeet and got through to Mike Neeland. "You'd better put that ad in the Lost and Found."

Neeland swore softly. "You didn't come up with anything?"

"I'm still working, but I won't come up with anything before five."

Neeland gave it thought. "Maybe we can think up something. How about following whoever picks up the package this time?"

"I wouldn't monkey around, Mike. They probably thought of that too. If something goes wrong this time I think they might decide to steer you into the kind of trouble you don't want. Just so they get something out of the whole caper."

He cursed again. "I hate to part with the two hundred thousand, but what really burns is that some punks are getting away with it."

"You don't have a choice right now, Mike. Dorothy Gordon will phone the police in fifteen minutes."

Neeland gave up. "All right. I'll call her and tell her I've decided to pay the money."

There wasn't anything more for me to do now but wait. I took in a movie that night and slept late the next morning.

In the afternoon Mike phoned me at my hotel room.

"I got the two hundred thousand and now I'm waiting. No word yet."

"You probably won't have to deliver until it's nice and dark. When did the ad appear?"

"The eleven o'clock edition this morning."

"They'll probably phone tonight and at the last minute. That way they won't be giving you any time to build up any tricks."

"I'm not building any tricks," Neeland said gloomily. "I just want to get this over with."

"Call me the minute you get word."

It was a long wait and Neeland finally phoned at ten that night.

"They just got in touch with me."

"By phone?"

"No. Telegram." He laughed softly. "Looks nice and innocent. WILL CALL FOR MY PACK-

AGE AT 57 AND CC ELEVEN TONIGHT."

I waited until quarter to eleven and then drove to Fitz's apartment building. On the third floor I knocked softly on door 31. Fitz wasn't the kind to spend evenings at home—especially not this one—but I wanted to be positive.

When there was no answer, I went through my ring of keys until I found one that worked.

I closed the door behind me and switched on the lights.

It was a small one room utility apartment with a kitchenette and bath. The pull-down bed was a mess of sheets and blankets and took up almost all of the room. Racing forms almost crowded the telephone off the tiny table at the window. The kitchenette itself was cluttered with dishes and the bathroom was dark with the grime of weeks.

I switched off the lights, sat down on the unmade bed, and lit a cigarette.

When you want someone to pick up a package containing two hundred thousand dollars, you don't just pick a name out of a telephone book. You have to find one of the people who are willing to do that kind of work—and do it without curiosity. You have to find someone who is used to doing things without asking ques-

tions, who follows instructions.

You go to the places where you are most likely to find him and his friends. You don't go as Sam Gordon. You go as Ernie Wallace. You play pool with them. You listen. And at last, maybe after weeks, you decide which of them you can trust—for your purposes. Baini, for instance. Or Ben Grady, or Fitz.

You use Baini the first time. But he gets himself caught and he's out of commission.

Now you have another chance at the two hundred thousand. You can't take a risk on a complete stranger as your errand boy. So you come back to Ben and Fitz.

But Ben isn't available—according to whoever had answered the phone at Swenson's—and so that leaves you with Fitz.

I wondered whose fingers those had been. Some bum off the streets? Somebody who wouldn't be missed while he was being cut up? Or maybe they were Ben Grady's. Was he the unlucky patsy? Maybe that was why the fellow at Swenson's hadn't seen him recently.

At eleven-twenty, the phone purred.

When I picked it up, I said, "Fitz."

The voice was a whisper. "Did you get the package?"

So Gordon was really impatient. "Yeah," I said.

There was a little silence. "Any trouble?"

"No."

"Anybody follow you?"

"No." So Gordon hadn't been watching at the pick-up point. He was playing it a little different this time.

A little more silence and then, "Take it to the Northwestern Railroad Depot and wait near the ticket island."

I tried to keep my voice as neutral as I could and hoped it would pass as Fitz's. "You'll be there?"

"I might be. Or you might get a phone call telling you where to go from there."

The whisper made the voice impossible to identify. Not that I expected to be able to do that in the first place. I'd never seen or heard Gordon.

"I'm leaving right away," I said, and waited.

The click broke the connection.

I put down the phone. I had a pretty good idea of what was supposed to happen next. Gordon might be at the Northwestern Depot, but I doubted it. Probably there would be another phone call at the station telling Fitz to take the briefcase to some other nice public place. Gordon might pick it

up there, but more likely Fitz would be sent on and on, from one place to another. Somewhere along the line Gordon would be waiting—making absolutely sure that Fitz wasn't being followed before he claimed the briefcase.

I lit a cigarette and waited.

At eleven-thirty, I heard the footsteps and then a key being worked in the lock. I went into the bathroom and waited until the lights were on and the door closed. Then I stepped out again.

Fitz's mouth dropped at the sight of me—and the .38.

"No noise," I said. "And everything will be just dandy."

I don't think he could have made any noise at the time anyway. His eyes were hypnotized by the gun.

"Put the briefcase on the bed."

He looked at it as though he had never seen it before and then did as he was told.

"Do you know what's in there?" I asked.

He was rapid to deny it. "No, sir. I don't know a thing about it and I'm not curious."

"And besides, it's locked?"

"Yes, sir. But I wouldn't have looked anyway."

I ran my hands over him to see if he were carrying anything that could hurt me. Then I put away my revolver. I could handle Fitz

if he tried anything. "Take it easy."

"Yes, sir." His kind are always polite when they're scared.

I pried the screw-driver blade out of my pocket knife and went to work on the briefcase. I had to be positive that the money was there before I went on with anything else. I don't like to waste effort or take chances for nothing.

I broke the lock and opened the case. It was all there in neat bundles—two hundred thousand dollars.

Fitz watched bug-eyed. "Is it real?"

I hoped it was and I didn't have any reason to doubt it. I looked at Fitz and decided on the next step. If it worked, things would be easier for me. I like to keep them relaxed. "No," I said. "It's counterfeit. You couldn't fool the old lady in the candy store with the stuff."

He stared at me.

I smiled. "The syndicate was testing you. I wanted to know if you could be trusted." I didn't know if there was a syndicate in this city or not, but punks like Fitz always think there is.

The word "syndicate" was like "Major League" to a rookie with the Green Bay Blue Jays. Fitz swallowed. "The syndicate?"

"That's right. We've had our eye

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on you for quite awhile now."

He didn't know yet whether that was good or bad.

"We think you're ready for bigger things."

He brightened considerably.

"We think you've got what it takes. Not like Grady or Bains."

He was eager to agree with me. "Just small-time pool jockeys."

"That's right. But you've got brains."

Very few people plead innocent when they're accused of having intelligence. Fitz nodded. "It takes brains to get ahead nowadays."

He used those bird brains to ask me a question. "Are you the one who's supposed to pick up the briefcase?"

I smiled. "Was I supposed to give a password or something square like that?"

Fitz shook his head. "No. I just got the phone call. I didn't know who it was, but I was told to pick up the briefcase and bring it back to my room. Somebody would pick it up in the next twenty-four hours."

I clicked my tongue. "That Georgie. He gets twenty-thousand a year besides the bonuses and he messes up a simple little thing like this. The least he could have done was to describe me." I picked up the briefcase and went to the door. As a seeming afterthought, I

turned. "You got anything planned for the rest of the night?"

"No, sir."

I let him see that I was thinking. I rubbed my jaw. "I think you're ready. Care to see the district boss?"

His mind must have latched on to the twenty grand Georgie was supposed to be making. "Sure. Sure. Anything you say."

I let him carry the briefcase down to the car and he walked as proud as a dog with a newspaper in his mouth.

He almost patted my car as he got in. "Swell heap," he said. He was buying one like that already.

I eased away from the curb. "Turk has his place out in the country."

"Turk?"

"The district boss."

Fitz was imagining. "An estate like?"

"Lots of land. Lot of trees."

The great mind of Fitz was working. "How much does the district boss get?"

"Fifty thousand from the syndicate." I winked. "But anybody who's smart knows how to double that."

Fitz grinned and winked too. We were buddies and in the know. He got in the car.

It was a pleasant drive, fifteen miles into the country, and down

a couple of side roads until I found a nice dark stretch of forest.

I stopped the car. "We'll have to walk the rest of the way. Turk's driveway is being re-paved. But there's a path somewhere here right to the house."

We made our way about a hundred yards into the woods and then I decided that it was time for Fitz's dream to come to an end.

I had been leading and when I turned I had the .38 in my hand. In the shadows he might not even have seen it. I fired once and he dropped without so much as a sound. When I knelt beside him I saw that one slug had been plenty.

I went back to the car. Gordon would think that Fitz had double-crossed him and Mike Neeland would think the same thing about the "kidnapers" of Gordon.

Two hundred thousand dollars was missing and I was the only one who knew where it was.

Back in the city I got a locker at the bus station and deposited the briefcase. It was a fine day's work and I was tempted to leave it at that.

But I began to wonder what Gordon would do now. When he eventually decided that Fitz had skipped with the money, would he keep sending more fingers back to Neeland hoping that he could pry another two grand out of him?

The more I thought about it, the more I saw that there was still extra change to pick up. Suppose I presented Gordon to Neeland? With all of his ten fingers? I had the idea that Neeland would be profitably grateful.

I put myself in Gordon's shoes. When I discovered that Fitz hadn't gone to the Northwestern Railroad Depot, what would I do? What would I think?

Had Fitz double-crossed me? Had he skipped with the money? Had he been picked up by Neeland's men? Were they working on him, hoping for a few enlightening words?

Or would I hope against my suspicions that something minor had happened? Maybe Fitz's car had broken down. But then wouldn't the idiot have sense enough to take a taxi?

I would fret and fume and go through a pack of cigarettes. Should I go to Fitz's apartment? No. That was out. Too dangerous. Neeland's men might be waiting for me. Should I go to the railroad station? No. That was no use. I'd had Fitz paged and he couldn't be there.

There wasn't a thing I could do except phone and phone. The railroad station again and again. And Fitz's apartment. Would all that phoning do any good? I wouldn't

know. But it was better than just sitting and doing nothing.

I drove back to Fitz's apartment and let myself in. I didn't have to wait long. The phone came to life at a quarter to one.

I picked it up and said, "Fitz."

The other end of the line nearly exploded. There was no whispering this time. He was too angry for that. "Where the hell have you been?" he wanted to know.

I'd never met Gordon or heard his voice, but this wasn't him. It sounded like . . . I had to hear the voice talk some more before I could be sure. "I had trouble with my car," I mumbled.

The man's exasperation was overwhelming. "Why the hell didn't you take a taxi?"

I kept talking as though I had cornflakes in my mouth. "I thought it was something that would take just a minute to fix, but it took longer than I thought."

He cursed. "What are you doing back in your apartment?"

"I got dirty, so I'm washing up."

I couldn't see him, but I had the idea that the phone he was holding was in danger of being broken in two.

"Listen, dimwit," he snapped. "Get over to the railroad station. And that means right now."

I placed the voice now. It was Van Camp, Mike Neeland's man-

ager at the Blue Moraine. "You'll be there?" I asked.

"Don't worry about that. Just drag that lead bottom over there and wait."

I put down the phone. It didn't matter to me if Van Camp went there or not. If he did he'd probably be nice and snug in a spot from which he could see me without my seeing him. He might even be making his calls from the Blue Moraine, planning to send me from place to place before he made an appearance.

I got to the Blue Moraine forty-five minutes later. It was the shank of the evening for the kind of entertainment the club provided, and the fleet of cars parked outside told me that the second floor was doing a good business.

I asked about Van Camp and wasn't too surprised to find that he was in.

I went to the rear of the first floor, knocked on the door marked Private, and turned the knob.

Van Camp was at his desk. The smoke was thick in the room and the ashtray sported a mound of butts.

Van Camp glared at me irritably. "What do you want?"

I closed the door behind me. "It's all over, Van Camp."

"What are you talking about?"

"I have a good ear for voices. You weren't talking to Fitz a little while ago. You were talking to me."

His eyes narrowed warily. "Who is Fitz supposed to be?"

I smiled. "Baini, Ben Grady, and Fitz were what you might call your reservoir of messenger boys. You sent Baini out the first time and he got messed up. That left you with Ben and Fitz. Ben, I understand, is out of town. And that left you only Fitz. Simple, no? I figured it out with my own little brain."

"You're talking through your hat." But the curiosity got him just the same. "This Fitz you're talking about. Where is he?"

I don't know if I managed a blush, but I tried. "I don't know. I waited for him and finally forced my way into his apartment. It looks like he just picked up the briefcase and kept traveling."

Van Camp's face got splotted with anger, but he said nothing.

I moved my hand significantly into my pocket. "I may have missed Fitz, but I've got you."

He still wasn't admitting anything. "And what do you expect out of that?"

"I think Mike Neeland might get a little satisfaction out of talking to you. Know what I mean?"

He didn't like the thought of that. He made a big operation out of selecting a cigarette out of the silver casket on his desk. "How much is Neeland paying you?"

"I'm expecting five thousand."

Van Camp decided to stop being coy. "I'll give you ten."

I shook my head. "I wouldn't buck Neeland. He's got too many friends."

"Twenty," Van Camp said.

"Not for double that." I sighed. "Even if I would, you're trying to buy out with Confederate money. If you had twenty grand, you wouldn't be messing around with kidnaping." I waited for something more concrete. I wondered if I would have to suggest it myself.

The faint shine of perspiration appeared on Van Camp's forehead. "Look, I'm the manager of this place," he said. "Right? Every evening we take in twenty, thirty grand."

"Not your money," I said.

He was explaining something to a backward boy—patiently, but desperately. "But I get to handle it for awhile. Mike doesn't send his collector to pick up the receipts until six in the morning."

I played it dense. "What are you going to tell Mike when he finds money missing?"

"I won't tell him anything," Van Camp snapped impatiently. "By six

I'll be out of the state and still going."

I finally nodded. "Let's see the money."

Van Camp had some of it in his safe and he went around to the play on the second floor and got as much more as he could without crippling the tables or raising eyebrows. I followed him when he did that. Not so close that anybody would remember we were together, but close enough so that he wouldn't get the idea of pocketing the money himself and jet-planing out a rear door.

Back in his office, we totaled up and had something in the neighborhood of eighteen thousand.

Van Camp was sweating with the exertion of it all, as he shoveled the money into a briefcase and handed it to me.

"What about Gordon?" I asked.

He was a trifle irritated to be reminded of Gordon at this particular time. "Let him die there."

The words made me blink. "Where is he?"

I got him tied up in the cellar of a little cottage I own up in the mountains."

I put the briefcase under my arm and decided that it wouldn't hurt to display a little real ignorance now. "I thought you and Gordon were in on this together."

"We were." He glanced at his

watch, eager to be off into the wild blue yonder. "Gordon was the one who scouted out Baini, Grady, and Fitz. But after the first drop didn't work, he was all in favor of pulling out and forgetting the whole thing."

It came to me clear now. "But you didn't go for that? And the fingers really belonged to Gordon?"

He nodded. The matter no longer interested him. He was thinking of other things.

"You'll have to get rid of Gordon," I said. "Right now."

"Why bother? He'll die right where he is in a couple of days without food or water."

"Maybe. But suppose he should get away? He might be just mean enough to go to the police and make out like it was a real kidnaping. The fingers he's got missing will make his story hold real water. And then you'll wind up with not only Neeland after you, but the whole F.B.I. You wouldn't stand a chance." I let that sink in. "If you're a little squeamish about applying the final touch, I'll do it for you."

Van Camp saw it my way, but not happily. "All right. But let's hurry it up."

We took his car and it was a forty-five minute trip, even at the fast clip we were going. We final-

ly turned into what looked like an old logging road and pulled up in front of the cottage at three in the morning.

Van Camp got out of the car with a flashlight and I followed him. The small frame building was without electricity and smelled of dust. In the kitchen Van Camp reached down for a ring set in the linoleum-covered floor.

He pulled open the trap door and the beam of his flashlight cut down into the mouldy darkness. The cellar was hardly more than a hole in the ground and Gordon lay in one corner, his hands tied behind him. He was gagged and the rope wound around his feet was looped around his neck. Anyway you looked at it, he wasn't getting much air.

Gordon didn't look pretty now and his eyes were shiny with terror.

"Get it over with," Van Camp commanded.

I didn't bother to go down the wooden steps. I fired once. Gordon jerked with the impact of the bullet and rolled over on his face. I saw that two fingers of his right hand were missing. And that told me something.

Van Camp was about to lower the trap door.

"I'm not through yet," I said.

His eyes went to mine and he

had about one second to realize what was going to happen next.

My slug caught him true and as he staggered I gave him a slight push with my fingertips. He dropped down into the hole and the flashlight rolled in too before I could stop it. I closed the trap door and used my lighter to find my way out of the cottage.

I drove back to the Blue Moraine, picked up my own car, and got back to the city by five o'clock. The sun was just beginning to come up.

I found an all-night cafe and had a slow breakfast. Then I deposited the eighteen grand in my locker at the bus depot and went to my hotel room for a few self-inflicted congratulatory drinks.

At six-thirty, I drove to the Parakeet. The games were closed down now and the help gone. In an hour or so the clean-up crew would show up for work.

Mike Neeland was still in his office. His eyes were circled with fatigue. "Something's gone wrong, Danny. They haven't let Gordon go yet. His wife called me just fifteen minutes ago. She says she's going to phone the police if I don't see that he's released right away."

I lit a cigarette. "Mike, I've put all the pieces together. I'm sorry it's too late for me to do anything about things, but—"

"What are you talking about?"

"The kidnaping," I said. "It wasn't a kidnaping at all. Gordon's still got all ten of his fingers and he's a long way from here by now."

Neeland's eyes narrowed.

"The fingers probably belonged to some poor bum Gordon picked up. Gordon planned this whole shakedown." I thought for a moment about the eight fingers Gordon still had when I had seen him last. I knew the answer to the question I asked. "Did you get another finger in the mail yesterday?"

"No."

"But you *should* have."

He frowned. "Why? I already agreed to pay."

I smiled. "According to the postmarks on the wrappers, Gordon mailed the first two fingers from places thirty to forty miles away. His notes promised steady delivery. Your ad telling him that you were going to meet his terms didn't appear in the Journal until the eleven o'clock morning edition. And so if he depended exclusively on that ad for all his information, he should *already* have had another finger on its way in time for you to get it in your one-thirty mail."

I paused. "But he already knew that the ad was going to appear. He knew it the day before. He didn't have to bother cutting off another finger that night and mail-

ing it. He knew that you were going to pay because somebody *told* him. And who knew the ad was going to appear? Just you, and me—and Dorothy Gordon."

And that's the way it was. Except that it was Van Camp, Dorothy Gordon had told. Not Sam Gordon. And I had the idea that a woman who would let her husband be cut to bits had other plans. Probably she and Van Camp had decided to kill Gordon after they got the money and go away together.

Mike Neeland paced my information back and forth across the room.

"There's something else," I said. "I think that Gordon took the money and ran off without his wife."

"What makes you think that?"

"You told me she just phoned. Now would she do that if Gordon *and* she had the money?" I shook my head. "No. She thinks you didn't pay. But eventually she'll get onto the fact that he ran off."

Neeland swore thoroughly. Then he glared at me. "I want you to take care of Dorothy Gordon right away. Get that?"

I nodded. "All right, Mike. And I'll do that errand for nothing. I haven't done you much good on this job."

He waved that away. "No. I'll

see that you get the usual five grand for it."

The phone rang and Neeland picked it up. As he listened his face got even darker. Finally, he slammed down the receiver.

I waited politely.

Neeland breathed hard. "On top of everything else, it looks like Van Camp emptied the till at the Blue Moraine and skipped. I suppose he's in South America too by now."

I rose and put on my hat. "I'll take care of Dorothy Gordon now."

He stopped me at the door. "Danny."

"Yes?"

"Danny, when you take care of that, come back here."

"Sure. I'll report back in."

"That isn't what I mean, Danny.

I'd like you to stay with me. In the organization."

I thought about the organization—about the eighteen thousand the Blue Moraine took in by only two in the morning, about the other clubs Mike owned.

And I thought about Eve Neeland too.

I met his eyes. "I once heard you say that you didn't want anybody with brains around you."

He smiled faintly. "Sure you got brains, Danny, but there's something more about you."

"What's that?"

His face became solemn. "I can trust you. That's what."

Tears didn't come to my eyes, but I did let him see me swallow.

"Thanks, boss. You can count on me."



And now that you have finished reading Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, how did you like it? I should also be very interested to receive your reactions to the stories in it. Write to me c/o Suite 105, Lakeview Building, North Palm Beach, Florida.

